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Conducting Community-Engaged Research in Academia

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Abstract: *The knowledge production generated by community-engaged research is often deemed less scholarly than traditional research and is considered incompatible with the tenure process of academia.*

My background is that of a grassroots adult educator. For 14 years I worked in an adult literacy community based program in the South Bronx that was grounded in Freirian principles (Freire, 2003). Throughout the years, academic researchers would ask to visit our program and occasionally would make requests to conduct research. Although generally there was a spirit of collaboration to these endeavors, when we read their reports, they often objectified the learners in our programs. Because I was of the same ethnic background of many of the learners and I also grew up in the projects of New York City, I believed that I was better suited to help design formal research projects in collaboration with the staff and learners of the literacy program. I was a proponent of participatory research (Ozerdem & Bowd, 2010), yet, I wanted to become familiar with traditional forms of research in order to deconstruct them and eventually conduct research that would benefit the local community. Hence, I applied to and was accepted into a doctoral program in adult education. I never intended to be a professor, but it soon became clear to me that doctoral programs are the training grounds for the profession. After attaining my degree, I cautiously entered the professoriate optimistic that the precept of academic freedom would allow me to conduct participatory research.

At Buffalo State College, where I am an assistant professor, there is an Office of College and Community Partnerships that provides competitive mini-grants for faculty to initiate partnerships that offer the greatest chance for meaningful community change and are mutually beneficial to both parties. Priority is given to projects that form partnerships with schools and other agencies located in the west side of Buffalo, a neighborhood that has the third highest number of people living below the poverty level in an urban community in the United States (Thomas, 2009).

In 2009 I received one of those mini-grants and conducted a qualitative research study at a community based organization that serves the Latino/a, African American, African and Laotian refugee populations on the west side. It has a large after school tutoring and recreational program for children and adolescents, but offers few programs for their parents. The purpose of my study was to:

- Establish the literacy needs of parents and/or primary caretakers of the children who attend the after school program
- Gather data on how literacy was used in their homes
- Propose family literacy activities that could be implemented at the CBO.

Most importantly, this study was my introduction to the CBO and the west side community in which it is located. I utilized community-engaged research methodology which is grounded in the belief that the knowledge of community members is valued, in which an ongoing mutually respected dialogue ensues between them and the faculty of the local university and in which locally relevant outcomes are generated. A key aspect of community-engaged research methodology is that the academic researcher maintains a relationship with the community for a matter of years rather than a few weeks or months (Simpson & Seibold, 2008) For the most part

this endeavor has proceeded as planned. Key staff members, parents and I are in the process of identifying ways to institutionalize family literacy activities onsite. However, there were a few glitches that were caused due to college policies. For example, in the spirit of respecting community knowledge, I wanted to pay ten dollars to every parent that I interviewed. Yet, college policies would not allow that I pay them and then get reimbursed. The parents were expected to fill out a two-page consultant form in which they had to list their social security number and other personal information and they would then have to wait several weeks to receive the ten dollar check. Luckily, I was able to make clear how unfeasible this policy was for the population with whom I was interacting. I was allowed to purchase gift certificates from local supermarkets and department stores. Hence, key informants were able to receive their gift certificates immediately after being interviewed.

What was disconcerting, however, took place at a meeting I attended. I was asked to be part of the advisory committee of the Office of College and Community Partnerships. At that meeting its Director stated how difficult it was to get faculty to submit proposals because the mini-grant from its office was considered to be a service learning endeavor. When one examines the literature the term service learning is used synonymously with that of community engagement. Furthermore, service learning projects are generally designed to engender perspective transformation of the student doing service rather than the community (Butin, 2010). It was also clear at the meeting that because community-engaged research was deemed as a service learning, it was not deemed scholarly and, hence, incompatible with attaining tenure. Again, literature supports this point of view (Berman, 2008; Simpson & Seibold, 2008).

Yet, I am committed to evolving my research agenda with community-engaged scholarship. Will I ever get tenure? I am sure I am not the only assistant professor with this dilemma. Let's discuss the issues associated with conducting community-engaged research in academia.

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